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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to discover who constituted the significant others of 101 rural, Caucasian children of 3, 4, 5, 7, and 8 years of age. The study was also meant to determine what family demographic variables might predict a child's selection of significant others and the possible relationship between a mother's perception of her child's significant others and the child's perception. Children participated in a structured oral interview and parents completed a questionnaire. Descriptive statistics, canonical correlations, and Pearson's correlations were used to obtain results. Family and friends were the main significant others for young children. Children did not consider teachers or child care providers to be as significant. Age of the child was the most prominent predictor of significant others, while the most predictable category of significant other was family members. Parental report of their offspring's significant other was inaccurate and age-related. The younger the child, the less the parent was aware who was perceived by the child as significant. Study findings indicate that the theoretical assumptions held for decades as to who constitutes the significant others of young children may not be accurate. (Author/RH)

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Significant Others of Young Children: Child and Parent Perceptions

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to discover who or what constitute the significant others of 101 rural Caucasian children, 3, 4, 5, 7, and 8 years of age, what family demographic variables may predict a child's selection of significant others, and the possible relationship between a mothers perception of her child's significant others and the child's perception. Child measure of significant other was a structured oral interview while parent measure of their offsprings significant other was through a questionnaire. Descriptive statistics, canonical correlations, and Pearson's correlations yielded the following overall results. Family and friends are the main significant others for young children while teachers and/or child care providers are not considered as significant. Age of the child is the most prominent predictor of significant others while the most predictable category of significant other was family members. Parental report of their offspring's significant other was inaccurate and age related. The younger the child the less aware the parent was of who the child perceived as significant. This study indicated that the theoretical assumptions held for decades as to who constitutes the significant others of young children may not be accurate.

Significant Others of Young Children:

Parent and Child Perspectives

Self-concept has been reported as the single most important variable in an individuals life (Keat, 1974; Durbin, 1982; Satir, 1988; & Frey, 1988). Self concept, in part, is a function of the individuals perception and relationship to others whom she or he believes to be important or significant (Cox, 1974). According to the symbolic interaction perspective, an individual's self-concept arises during the course of social interaction with persons referred to as significant others (Cooley, 1902; Mead, 1934). The influence of others in the formation of attitudes, values, self-conceptions and other psychological structures is at the core of sociological theory (Woelfel & Haller, 1971).

Regardless of theoretical orientation, the impact of significant others on the developing child is an extremely powerful factor. Significant other influence appears to be an important variable in status attainment (Haller & Portes, 1973), career aspirations and educational persistence (Sewell, Haller & Ohlendorf, 1970; Falk, 1980; Howell and Frese, 1979; Picou & Carter, 1976), self esteem (Stanwyck, 1983) and emotional security (Jourard & Remy, 1955). Through interaction with significant others the lives of young children are uniquely impacted. This early learning is unique because it determines the perceptual

screen though which later experiences are filtered (Frey, 1989). Discovering who a young child perceives as significant others in his or her life and the demographic variables that may impact that perception is an important research question.

Significant other influence has received far more theoretical than empirical attention (Falk, 1980). The majority of previous research has sought information on putative significant others. Sullivan (1953) assumed parents were significant, Denzin (1966) assumed classmates were significant and Manis (1955) assumed friends were significant. Jourard & Remy (1955) believed the significant people to affect the child's feelings about her/himself are first parents and later teachers. Although these assumptions appear reasonable and have remained unchanged and unchallenged for decades by empirical research, ultimately only the child can determine whether a particular person is significant to him or her. Assumed significant others are not necessarily real significant others (Rosenberg, 1973).

In the past, parents, the general public, as well as theorist and researchers have identified the young child's significant others as members of primary groups: family, peers, and adults of the community (Cooley,1927). However, because of the many changes that have developed in our society, such as increased maternal employment and subsequent early out-of-home care, early entry of children into school environments, single parenting, mobility, and the increasing influence of the media, there is a need to empirically examine the

significant others in the lives of the young child. The young child of today will interact more frequently without parental supervision in play groups, with school peers, in television viewing and with unrelated adults (Gestwicki, 1987). All of these environments provide the availability of individuals, objects, and/or circumstances which are potential significant others to that child. Who are the significant others of the child of today? Do parents know who their child's significant others are? What are the demographic variables that influence the child in his or her selection of significant others? Investigating these questions in a changing culture is imperative.

Two major issues regarding significant other research are apparent in the literature. First the majority of the research on significant others has been conducted on older children or adults (Sigafoos, 1986). Secondly, most of the significant other research relied on an adult perception of children's significant others. Researchers utilized measuring instruments with adult preselected groups of "others", such as parents, teachers or friends (Stritchfeild & Picou, 1982).

The purpose of this study is three-fold: 1) To discover who or what constitute the significant others of children 3,4,5,7, and 8 years of age 2) To discover what family demographic variables may predict a child's selection of significant others and 3) To discern the possible relationship between a mother's perception of her child's significant others and the child's perception.

Method

The sample consisted of 101 (53 males and 48 females) rural Caucasian children ages 3,4,5,7,and 8 years of age from a day care center, preschool program and public school in Montana. The age range for the children was from 3.0 to 8.11 years with a mean age of 5.1. The schools were selected based on willingness to participate in the project and convenience.

The following demographics provide a grouped mean profile of the children's family systems involved in the study: mother's age ($\bar{x}$ = 33.34), mother's education level ($\bar{x}$ = 15 years), father's education level ($\bar{x}$ = 14.9 years), number of children per family ($\bar{x}$ = 2.4), and family income ($\bar{x}$ – $26,599). Seventy nine percent (79%) of the families were two parent households, while 21% were single female heads of households. Sixty three percent (63%) of the mothers worked outside the home for pay, 25% worked full time as a homemaker, and 13% were full time college students.

Procedures

Child Measure of Significant Others. A structured oral interview, in an open ended format, was designed to elicit children's significant others. Since young children do not have the language nor cognition to comprehend the term significant other, conceptual components were extracted from the theoretical and

research literature. Significant others have been defined as those individuals who exercise a major influence on the attitudes of individuals by 1) communicating the norms, values, and expectation of the society in which the individual resides 2) defining behavior that is considered to be appropriate to the culture or society in which they live 3) modeling appropriate attitudes and behaviors and 4) providing the necessary information about the environment to the individuals under their influence (Woefel & Haller, 1971). This adult centered definition needed to be translated into a child-centered operational definition. Utilizing the above definition and child development literature, conceptual components of significant others understandable to young children three years of age and older were developed. Young children perceive the world egocentrically (Piaget, 1955) and through relationships with others (Synder, Synder, & Synder, 1980) Interview questions were developed using these guidelines. Each child was asked: Who or what helps you feel safe?; Who or What helps you feel "very special"?; Who or what do you like a lot that likes you a lot too?; Who or what would you like to be like?; Who or what do you learn things from?; and Who or What do you share things with?. These statements were pilot tested on 20 children ages 3-8 years of age. Results of the pilot test revealed that the young child was capable of responding, enjoyed sharing his or her world, corrected the investigator quickly if misunderstandings arose, and did not distinguish between who or what. The child

when asked who helps you feel safe was as likely to reply with an inanimate or animate object as if they were asked who or what. Consequently, the what was removed from the interview format.

The interview was designed to elicit a list of significant others from a young child who has a limited command of written and expressive language. The interview was introduced as a "game" in which children would produce a list of significant others then enjoyed manipulating blocks they chose to symbolize the identified significant others. The interview took place in a familiar setting with two familiar female adults, a designated recorder and communicator. The communicator's task was to stay in relationship with the child and clarify the child's responses so the recorder could document the actual words of the child. The communicator was trained in the use of reflective listening techniques and gentle probing questions designed to clarify the child's verbal responses.

The children's responses were reviewed and categorical analysis revealed commonalities. Relationship categories for classifying the children's significant others were developed from subjectively examining the children's responses. The children's interview responses were categorized into the following relationship categories: family, friends, objects, animals, teachers, spiritual and other. The other category contained low frequency counts of television shows or characters (i.e ninja turtles), actions (i.e. playing, movies, writing), non-family member

adults (i.e. a friend's mom) and places (i.e. my bedroom). Frequency counts were calculated for the total number of significant others and numbers of significant others by relationship category for each child.

Parent Measure of Child Significant Others. Demographic data and significant other information was collected via a questionnaire. The original goal was to include all parents in the study; however, the questionnaire was completed by only mothers consequently mother report of father information was not utilized in this study. Information in regard to mother's educational level, age, employment, marital status, family income, and number of children in the family was obtained. In addition, parents were asked to list the persons or objects they believed to be a significant other to their child and designate the relationship that person or object has with the child (i.e. Bobby - Brother). Significant other was defined for the parents as those persons or objects which exercise a major influence on the individual by: providing safety, providing a feeling of being "special", providing a relationship of mutual importance, providing a relationship through which special things are learned and shared. The total number of significant others and the significant others by relationship category (as determined by the children) was coded for analysis.

Research Questions and Data Analysis

To determine who or what young children of different ages considered as significant others in their lives, frequency counts of declared significant others by relationship category was calculated. The relationship categories were as follows: family members, friends, objects, animals, teachers, spiritual beings, and other. Descriptive analysis, based on medians, of this data presents a profile of who or what young children in this study perceived as significant others. Medians were utilized to avoid the extremes and better represent the sample profile.

The predictive power of the demographics in regards to being able to indicate the child's significant other profile was of interest. Two groups of variables were used. The demographic variables consisted of child's gender, child's age, mother's education level, father's education level, mother's age, marital status of parents, family income, and the number of children in the family. The relationship category variables consisted of the number of counts of family, friends, objects, animals, teachers, spiritual beings, and others the children declared as significant others. To reveal the underlying relationship between the two groups of variables (demographics versus relationship category counts) a canonical correlation was utilized. This method relies on producing a linear combination of the demographics which is maximally correlated with the linear combination of the relationship category counts (Morrison, 1976).

In addition to collecting responses from the children, mothers (guardians) were asked to predict their offsprings counts of significant others. It was hypothesized that the parent was unable to predict their child's response on any of the significant other categories: family, friends, objects, animals, teachers, spiritual, other; and also on the total number of significant others recorded (i.e. the sum of the above relationship categories). Pearson's correlation coefficient was calculated for each of the categories between the parent and child's response. Since multiple hypotheses needed to be tested a Bonferroni approach was utilized (Morrison, 1976).

Results

The results of the study are reported in three categories corresponding to the research questions. These categories are: significant other relationships categories, predictive demographics, and parents versus children.

Significant Other Relationship Categories

A relationship category profile of who or what was selected as significant others by age and gender based on median scores is as follows: A typical three-year-old (n = 22) selected 2 family and 2 friends; a four-year-old (n = 25) selected 3 family and 2 friends; a five-year-old (n = 22) selected 4 family, 2 friends, and 1 object; a seven-year-old (n = 14) picked 7 family, 2 friends, 1 object, 1 teacher, and 1 other; and an eight-year-old (n = 18) perceived 10 family,

2 friends, and 1 animal as significant others. Overall the number of total significant others selected by each age group increased as the children got older. Six, 7, 9, 15, and 16 are the total number of significant others by median per age group representing 3,4,5,7, and 8 year old responses respectively.

The boys in the study (n = 53) selected a median of 9 significant others. They perceived that 4 family, 3 friends and 1 teacher was significant to them. The girls (n = 48) selected a median of 10 significant others. They perceived that 4 family, 2 friends, and 1 object were significant others to them. Table 1 reflects these descriptive results.

Insert Table 1 Here

Predictive Demographics

The canonical correlation revealed only the first canonical variate was significant with a p-value of .0001 and produced the standardized canonical coefficients in Table 1. From the canonical coefficients, it was obvious that the most prominent demographic predictor was year (.8676) or age of the child. Similarly, the most predictable relationship category count is that of family members since .8882 is the largest canonical coefficient. In fact, a multiple regression analysis where family members was the dependent variable and the

demographics were the independent variables revealed an R^2 of .475. A simple linear regression to predict family members from year alone generated an R^2 of .423. Both of these procedures were significant at $\alpha = .0001$.

Insert table 2 here

Parents Versus Children

Pearson's correlation coefficient was calculated for each of the relationship categories between the parent and child's response. These correlations along with their *p*-values as calculated from Fisher's *z*-transformation (Morrison, 1976) appear in table 3. To simultaneously test multiple hypotheses a Bonferroni approach was utilized. Selecting an overall α of .05 and comparing the *p*-values to .003 to determine significance, indicates that the parent is not able to predict their child's significant others in any relationship category.

Insert table 3 here

Having ascertained that a parent does a poor job of predicting the child's count of significant others, it would be of interest to understand the factors

contributing to this phenomena. Because of the findings in the canonical correlation analysis, it was decided to restrict further analysis to the year and family member variables. It was hypothesized that a parent of an older child would more accurately guess their offspring's number of family member named as significant others. First a global test via multiple linear regression was conducted. The results indicated that the parent's response did not coincide with the child's response and that the age of the child affected the count of the number of family member who were significant others. This result was also detected by prior analysis.

To follow up on the analysis, the pooled sample variance from the global test was used to construct test statistics on the differing means. The goal was to test H_0: $\mu_{i,j} - \mu_{i,1}$ over all ages (year = 3,4,5,7,8), where $\mu_{i,0}$ is the mean count for an i-aged child and $\mu_{i,1}$ is the mean count for the parent of an i-aged child. Table 3 shows those means along with the sample size for each group, and the p-value based on a t-distribution with degrees of freedom equal to the two times the sample size minus two.

Insert table 4 here

With an overall $\alpha = .05$, using a Bonferronni approach, the *p*-values should be compared to .005. The idea of equal counts among parents and children in the 3,4 and 5 year age brackets is rejected. The parent of younger child does have more difficulty in predicting the number of family members named as significant others than does the parent of an older child.

Discussion

The present study collected descriptive statistics on who or what young children perceive as significant others as well as examined the affects of child age, child gender, mother's age, employment, education level, marital status, family income, stress level, number of children in the family on who or what children perceive as significant others and the possible differences between parent and child perceptions.

Descriptive statistics results indicated that the total number of significant others selected by the young child increases with age. This supports the notion that as young children grow their real and perceptual world expands. Theoretically significant others identified through the life-span have been parents (and increasing numbers of day care attendants) for the preschool child, teachers for the early school years, and around the age of 8-10 years, the peer group's status as a significant other is defined (Stanwyck, 1983). Results of this study do not support these putative significant others. This study revealed that family

members are significant others for all ages tested and the number of significant other family members increased with age. Three year olds selected 2 family members (parents) and this number increased progressively reaching 10 family members selected by 8 year olds. Significant others appear to include the nuclear immediate family and the extended family for children in this rural environment. This data supports the position that the family is a primary and powerful teacher. Through family interaction individuals develop an early picture of themselves (Frey, 1989). Considering the importance of family members to the young child, it becomes critical that teachers accept all "types" of families as normal, that they extend the school beyond parent involvement to total family involvement as much as possible, and higher education institutions must emphasize the study of family preparing future teachers. The understanding of family systems by those who work with children becomes paramount in supporting the self-concept of those children.

Peers defined as friends appear to be significant to 3 year olds as well as 8 year olds. Two friends were identified as significant others by all age groups. Theoretically, the significance of peers as mediators of culture has been reserved for the middle school age population. The significance of peers to young children may have been underestimated or the changing culture creating earlier out-of-home and peer experiences has increased the significance of friends in the

lives of the young child. According to Gambrill and Richey (1985) friends for adults provide a sense of belonging, validation for beliefs, feelings and self-worth, and assistance in learning new skills. This may also be the case for the young child. More research on the role of friends for the young child is necessary.

It has typically been assumed that teachers are powerful significant others. Edwards (1986) reports that for many American children teachers are significant others and may be the adults outside the immediate family with whom they spend the most time and have the closest relationship. Brookover, Thomas, and Patterson (1964) reported that by the seventh grade, 90% of a large sample of pupils named a teacher as a person who cared about them. Of the children participating in this study only the seven-year-olds when considering age groups and the boys when considering gender perceived their teacher as a significant other. No other empirical information on early childhood aged children (0-8 years of age) is available for these results to be compared. Further research in this area is definitely needed. If a significant number of early childhood students (3,4,5,8 year olds and females) are not perceiving their teachers as significant others in their lives it would appear the school may not be capable, under the present system, of meeting the goals of society to educate and assist in the socialization of the young. Stanwyck (1983) included day-care attendants as significant others for the young child in child care situations. Results of this study

do not support these putative others. All the three and four year old children in this study attended child care and/or a preschool program. The children in this study did not select their child care provider and/or preschool teacher as a significant other. These children are spending from 4-10 hours a day in an environment with adults who they do not perceive as significant others as defined in this study. This definition includes people who help the child feel safe and special, someone the child likes a lot and knows likes them in return, someone who the child learns things from and someone the child shares things with. This information is alarming and indicates either methodological problems in the research study and design, a crisis with child care, preschool and public school environments, and a definite need for further research in this area.

Median results indicated that boys perceived one teacher as a significant others while the girls did not perceive any teachers as significant in their lives. Overwhelming evidence has been provided concerning the differential treatment of boys and girls in the school environment. Studies indicate that teachers have more interaction of all kinds with boys than with girls in the classroom. In general the teacher interaction studies suggest that girls are less visible and less audible in classrooms than boys (Weiner, 1980). This may explain why the young girls in this study did not perceive the teacher as a significant other. Many explanations are possible and further research is needed to uncover potential

reasons.

The older children in this study (5,7, and 8 years of age) selected non-humans as significant others. The five- and seven- year-olds selected one object while the eight-year-olds selected one animal. The investigators expected the young children (3-4 year of age) to perceive inanimate objects (i.e. blanket, stuffed animal) as significant others. It appears that young children perceive significant others differently than older children or adults or that there was an inadequacy in the operational definition utilized in this study.

Overall it appears that for this sample, family and friends are the main significant others for young children. This is supported by the work of Edwards (1986), who stated that for children close relationships come mainly in two types - friendship and family relationships.

Statistical analysis of demographic information revealed age to be the most prominent predictor. This coincides with theoretical information that hypothesizes that significant others are related to development and change over time. Stanwyck (1983) state that at various stages of an individuals development, one or several significant others may be identified. This data support the concept of significant other as a developmental phenomenon. Data also revealed that the most predictable relationship category was that of family members. Age of the

child is a good predictor of the number of family members perceived as significant others in this rural population. Further research in more urban mobile communities is needed for comparison.

Parent report of their offsprings significant other appears to be inaccurate and age related. The younger the child the more inaccurate was the parents' reports. Parents in this study were basically unaware of the forces that were shaping the personality of their child. This information shows the necessity for further research in this area.

This study indicated that the theoretical assumptions held for decades as to who are the significant others of young children may not be accurate. It appears that theorist have underestimated the impact of family and friends and over estimated the significance of teachers and child care providers. Further research is necessary to refine and define the methodological issues of assessing young children's perception of significant others; determine significant others of different samples; and to determine degree of significance by the relationship categories.

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Table 1

Median Relationship Category Counts of Significant Others by Age and Gender

	AGE					GENDER	
	3	4	5	7	8	M	F
n	22	25	22	14	18	53	48
Total	6	7	9	15	16	9	10
Category							
Family	2	3	4	7	10	4	4
Friends	2	2	2	2	2	3	2
Ojects	0	0	1	1	0	0	1
Teacher	0	0	0	1	0	1	0
Animal	0	0	0	0	1	0	0
Other	0	0	1	0	0	0	0

Table 2

Canonical Coefficients of Demographics and Relationship Category Counts

Variable	Coefficients
Demographics	
Year of Child	.8676
Sex of Child	.0642
Mother	.0673
Education	.0744
Father Education	-.0297
Mother Age	-.0248
Father Age	-.0820
Marital State	-.0660
Income	.1610
Total Children	
Counts	.8882
Family	.2166
Friend	-.0002
Object	.3969
Animal	.0335
Teacher	.0101
Spiritual	.0495
Other	

Table 3

Correlations Between Parent's and Child's Responses

Category	Correlation (r)	*P*-value
Family	.10385	.3014
Friends	.12541	.1770
Objects	.06346	.5284
Animals	.14790	.1400
Teachers	.02724	.7116
Spiritual	.16499	.0992
Other	.02730	.7864
TOTAL	-.04425	.6604

Table 4

Parent Prediction of Child Family Member Relationship Counts by Age

AGE	*n*	Parent Means	Child Means	*P*-Value
3	22	6.86	2.73	.0001
4	25	8.00	3.52	.0001
5	22	6.54	3.45	.0036
7	14	7.57	7.43	.9135
8	18	7.61	10.72	.0079